

SOME DOCUMENTS DEALING WITH "DIFFERENCES"
BETWEEN THE CONGRESS AND THE BIHAR KISAN SABHA

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The term "differences" has been euphemistically used for "split" so often in Indian politics, that the real seriousness of such an occurrence is not obvious without going to the original documents of the period. In 1937-38, there occurred one such "difference" between the premier political party of India, the Indian National Congress, and the principal mass organisation of the peasants, the All-India Kisan Sabha. An examination of some of the original documents dealing with the episode shows that the "difference" reached the dimensions of a "split" in the case of the relationship between Bihar Provincial Congress Committee and the local Kisan Sabha.

The Background

Before considering the documents, however, it is necessary to briefly go into the background of the two organizations and their relationship. The Bihar Provincial Congress Committee, a motley collection of various class interests, was distinguished from such bodies in other Provinces by the fact of the pre-eminent position held in it by one individual, Babu Rajendra Prasad, who had acquired the position of Mahatma Gandhi's Viceroy in Bihar.² The well known ability of Dr. Prasad to compromise various mutually conflicting interests had helped him achieve this position. On the other hand, the Bihar Kisan Sabha was formed in 1929 by a group of Congress workers who, in spite

of having tried to make it reflect the colour of the political leadership of the Congress,³ could not prevent it from becoming a militant mass organisation whose interest necessarily clashed with that of the landlord element in the parent organisation. In many ways, the "lumpen" character of the Kisan Sabha's undisputed leader, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, provoked conflict and, notwithstanding the attempts of the Congress national leadership to subdue this conflict, it reached a head in 1937-38. Congress leaders have generally tended to put the blame for this impasse on the Sabhaites. The facts revealed by the documents under examination speak otherwise.

The "differences" between the B.P.C.C. and the Kisan Sabha date almost from the founding of the latter organisation.⁴ But, after the Lucknow session of the Congress, the "differences", which till then had been largely slurred over, were brought to the fore. By then, the Kisan Sabha leaders, Swami Sahajanand in particular, had started realizing that many of the Congress leaders of Bihar were either zamindars themselves or had strong links with feudal interests.⁵ In 1936, Babu Rajendra Prasad efficiently manipulated the B.P.C. Working Committee to keep Sahajanand out of the Kisan Enquiry Committee set up by the Provincial Congress making the latter to reach the conclusion that with himself outside the committee "... the others would either be the stooges of zamindars, or, at best, interpreters."⁶ (translation by the author). After that, it was not long that "differences" turned into a "split".

The episode

Soon after this, the Indian **National** Congress adopted the "Faizpur Agrarian Programme", on the basis of which it contested the 1937 elections and came into power in several States including Bihar. The acceptance of office by the Congress acted as the catalyst in clearing the till then amorphous nature of the relationship between it and the Kisan Sabha and expedited a show-down. The first step in this direction was taken, characteristically, by Jawaharlal Nehru. Never one to pause and reflect before calling anything a spade, he issued a statement on 10 July, 1937:

"... We find to-day all manner of strange people who have never had anything to do with the peasantry before, talking in terms of economic programmes and trying in their uncouth way to woo the peasantry. Even political reactionaries of the deepest dye discuss unctuously agrarian programmes.⁷ This statement was obviously not worded to please the saffronclad Swami Sahajanand Saraswati.

Those interests in Bihar who were opposed to the Kisan Sabha were, however, not going to miss such a pronouncement and an opportunity to utilize it. An anonymous leaflet was issued immediately. It carried a photograph of "Pashtrapati Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru" and quoted him as having said:

"Often it has been seen that some people on not getting positions etc. in the Congress and on becoming angry due to personal reasons, form Kisan Sabhas and thus do personal and

improper things in the name of the Kisan Sabha. I cannot tolerate such things." (translation by the author)

Emboldened by the Congress President's approach, the anti-Kisan Sabha elements in Bihar started gunning for Sahajanand and his associates with vigour. Alongside, the Swami's organisation launched a campaign to bring pressure on the Congress government in Bihar to urgently undertake land reforms and rent-reduction measures. Huge demonstrations were held at Patna on 23 August, 1 September, and 19 and 26 November, 1937 and again in the summer of 1938. The ruling faction of the Congress alleged that in these meetings the slogan "Lathth hamara zindabad" (Long live our lathis) was used and people were incited to violence. A meeting scheduled for 15 July, 1938 was sought to be disrupted by imposing Section 144.⁹ Also, in the period 1936-39, the Kisan Sabha launched and fought the famous Bakasht struggle in Monghyr and many other struggles in Shahabad, Saran, Darbhanga, Patna, Champaran etc.¹⁰ These actions further incensed the ruling Congressmen.

The ire of Babu Rajendra Prasad, the Bihar Premier Srikrishna Singh etc. against Sahajanand and his associates was further aroused by the fact that the actions of the latter gravely endangered the Congress-zamindar agreement then being negotiated.¹¹ The Kisan Sabha reacted by its leader, Sahajanand, demanding:

"... a solemn reassurance and public declaration about the future programme of the Ministry in unequivocal terms so that we may be able to judge and ascertain the position in order to decide our future course of action which may not embarrass the Ministers as far as possible."¹²

The subtle and not so subtle implications of the above were not missed by the zamindars. The Zamindar Sabhas of Lalganj and Muzaffarpur, for instance, passed a resolution registering its "fear" at the advance towards anarchy by the disturbance among the ryots caused by the violent propaganda of the Kisan Sabha and at the fact that the importance of our political organisation, the Congress, is in danger.¹³ (translation and emphasis by the author). That their confidence in the Congress was justified was proved within ten days by a resolution passed by the B.P.C.C. condemning the so-called "cult of the danda" and enjoining upon all Congress workers to keep themselves aloof from such activities and, in accordance with the Congress policy, fight those who may be found indulging in them. It further impressed upon "such Congress members as are working in the Kisan Sabha that not only their active co-operation in such activities but also their passive association with them is improper." And it directed "the D.C.C.'s to keep an eye on these activities of its workers and to report them to the Provincial Congress Office."¹⁴ The stage was set for a full-fledged "difference".

The "official" position of the Congress was underscored by the comments in Mahatma Gandhi's paper, Harijan, by Mr. Mahadev Desai, who praised the "friendly and conciliatory talks between the zamindars and the representatives of the Kisans" (sic), condemned the "growing body of opinion which

evidently considers the two interests (of the zamindars and Kisans) as wholly conflicting" and emphatically supported the B.P.C.C. action, which he described as "a warning to the sabha and its members that if they use the Congress name to promote internal feuds they will invite a ban on themselves."¹⁵ Almost immediately, the zamindars in their newspapers and pamphlets started ridiculing the Kisan Sabha.¹⁶ The stand of the Saran, Champaran and Monghyr D.C.C.s, which had imposed a ban on Swami Sahajanand from touring their districts,¹⁷ seemed vindicated in the light of the endorsement from the very highest in the Congress, Babu Rajendra Prasad, and the Secretary of Mahatma Gandhi himself.

The Sabha leaders, like Jaya Prakash Narayan, on their side, condemned the actions of the D.C.Cs and the B.P.C.C.¹⁸ and Swami Sahajanand decided to defy the ban.¹⁹ Chandrashekhar Singh, a Kisan Sabha worker of Saran district, organised a series of 22 meetings which Sahajanand addressed. The official Congress opposed the meetings by organising black flag demonstrations, boycotts, the shouting of vulgar abuse and even physical confrontation. Disciplinary action was taken against Chandrashekhar Singh and others.²⁰ The charge of spreading "intellectual dissension" and violence was repeated again and again. The Kisan Sabha activists in Monghyr and other districts were "placed in a very embarrassing position. They are loyal and devoted Congressmen and do not want to go against the decisions of the Congress Committee.

At the same time they do not wish to give up the work of the Kisan Sabha, because they firmly believe that that work strengthens the Congress."²¹ One Ramautar Ram, the Secretary of the Machubani Town Congress Committee, was so confused that he wrote to Nehru asking him for a reply "in his own handwriting" advising on the proper course of action. A typed letter was sent in reply, neatly evading the issue: "As you know there has been some conflict in Behar between the Congress and the Kisan Sabha. In view of the peculiar position in Behar I cannot advise you and you should seek the advice of local leaders."²² The very same local leaders who had precipitated the "conflict"! Faced with this situation, Sahajanand resigned from the B.P.C.C. Working Committee.²³ Jaya Prakash Narayan thundered, "The action of the Working Committee in Bihar seems to be a part of a nation-wide offensive that the Right-wing leaders of the Congress have launched upon the growing left. The Right-wing wants to divorce parliamentary activity from mass agitation and struggle. The Left is proving an obstacle. Hence this drive in the name of non-violence"²⁴ and warned the Congress that "it should not create another 1908 (Sic) Surat debacle" by provoking the Sabhaites "to part company with the Congress just as Lokmanya Tilak had done then."²⁵

The matter went up to the Working Committee of the National Congress. "... Shri Rajendra Prasad placed before the Committee the situation created in the province by the activities of some of the members of the Kisan Sabha. He said that the utterances of the President of the Provincial Kisan

Sabha were also such as would lend support to violence."²⁶

A resolution, drafted in Jawaharlal Nehru's handwriting, was adopted. It stated "... The Congress has already fully recognised the right of Kisans and industrial workers to organise themselves in peasant unions or trade unions. Nevertheless it must be remembered that the Congress itself is in the main a kisan organisation. The Congress cannot associate itself with any activities which are incompatible with the basic principles of the Congress and will not countenance any of the activities of those Congressmen who as members of the Kisan Sabhas help in creating an atmosphere alien to Congress principles and activities and particularly leading to violence."²⁷ The breaking point was finally reached.

The beginning of the Second World War, the arrest of the main Kisan Sabha leaders and the resignation from office by the Congress Ministries, however, prevented what appeared to be the inevitable clash: whether it was inevitable or not is a matter of interpretation, which is outside the scope of this paper. The one thing that is clear is that the attempt by the Kisan Sabha leaders to form an independent economic and political organisation independent of both the propertied classes and of the working class²⁸ - was doomed to failure, as the subsequent history of the Sabha unambiguously demonstrates.

The Documents

It is obvious that for an episode as recent as this and involving many well-known personalities, there will be a plethora of documents and other sources of evidence. The

task, therefore, is not so much to discover documents but to sort them out and to extract the relevant information from them. This is not to say that the information is readily available. The documents used for the purpose of this paper are mainly concerned with the political activities of the Congress Party and as such contain information about agrarian problems only incidentally.

As has been mentioned (cf. n.1) the unpublished documents used were found among the Jawaharlal Nehru Papers in the Nehru Museum Library and the Rajendra Prasad Papers, copies of which have been acquired from the Indian Council of Historical Research. In the collection of Nehru Papers, there are some letters written to him by various people in Bihar and elsewhere dealing with the Congress-Kisan Sabha "differences". The most important among these are Swami Sahajanand's undated letter written to the President, Indian National Congress (cf. n. 17). Chandrashekhar Singh's letter to Nehru (cf. n. 20) and Pandit Ramnandan Mishra's letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad (cf. n. 21) substantiate many of the points made in Sahajanand's letter and give the Kisan Sabha side of the dispute. The papers in the Rajendra Prasad Collection (cf. n. 11) and Dr. Prasad's letter to Nehru (cf. n. 14) set forth the views of the leadership of the B.P.C.C. and the details of the Congress-zamindar agreement. From the anonymous pamphlet casting aspersions on the Kisan Sabha (cf. n. 8) and the resolution of the Lalganj Zamindar Sabha (cf. n. 13) some idea can be got of the opinion of the zamindars and from the papers dealing with the Congress Working Committee meeting (cf. n. 26) - the draft, the adopted resolution et al - of the position of

the A.I.C.C. Pamautar Ram's letter to Nehru and his reply thereto (cf. n. 22) and Nehru's noting on the back of the anonymous pamphlet mentioned above throw interesting sidelights on the episode and on the persons involved in this.

These unpublished documents are in manuscript or typewritten form, being mostly private letters. But, as private letters can never give a complete picture of public events in the period when mass media dealing with the same events exist simultaneously, published books and newspaper reports have also to be taken into consideration.

Finally, in the case of events as recent as this, there are a number of participants who are alive but whose involvement in or judgement of them has not been recorded. Personal interviews with them provide a great deal of very valuable information and they are particularly helpful in the process of interpretation. Unfortunately, in this instance, except for Mr. Hare Krishna Konar, the present General Secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha, all other people interviewed have desired to remain anonymous.

NOTES

1. The period covered by the paper is 1936-39, but the main events occurred in 1937-38. In reconstructing those events, use has been made of both published and unpublished material. The former include some of the writings of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, which, though published, are not easily available. The unpublished documents used are mainly of two categories : (i) the Rajendra Prasad Papers preserved in the National Archives of India, copies of which have been obtained by the State Legislature Unit of the Indian Council of Historical Research and (ii) A.I.C.C. Files, covering correspondence etc. on the Kisan and workers' struggles, preserved in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. The accuracy of some of the facts found in the above papers was verified in the course of personal interviews with present Kisan Sabha leaders in Calcutta. ~~The documents have been described later in the paper.~~
2. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, Mera Jeevan Sangharsh, Patna, 1952, (hereinafter referred to as S 1), p. 456. Bihar was referred to as "Rajan Babu's benami suba".
3. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, Kisan Sabha Ke Sansmaran, Allahabad, 1947 (?), (hereinafter referred to as S2), p. 16.
4. S1, p. 339.
5. Ibid., p. 478.
6. S2, p. 135.
7. Nripendra Nath Mitra (ed.), The Indian Annual Register, Jan-June, 1937, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1937, pp. 224-230.
8. Pamphlet filed in AICC File No. G-98, 1937, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. On the back of the pamphlet, there is a noting in Jawaharlal Nehru's handwriting "Placards against B.P. Sinha, Surya Nandan Thankur by zamindar using my name re Propaganda that the socialist and Kisan Sabha people running against Congress candidates".
9. S1, p. 502.
10. Ibid., p. 511.

11. Papers in the National Archives of India belonging to the Dr. Rajendra Prasad Collection. F.No.III/37, Col.No.1, Item No.16.
12. Statement of Sahajanand, AICC File G-28, 1937, p. 187.
13. Resolution of the Lalganj Zamindar Sabha, dated 4 December, 1937, ibid.
14. Rajendra Prasad's letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, dated Ziradei, 18 December, 1937, Enclosure, ibid.
15. Quoted in Amrit Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, 24 December, 1937.
16. Pandit Chhabinath Pandey, Kisan Sabhawan Ka Hasyaspad Krodh, "Navashakti," Patna, 25 December, 1937.
17. Sahajanand's letter to the President, Indian National Congress, undated, AICC File, op.cit.
18. Amrit Bazar Patrika, 19 (?) December 1937.
19. All-India Kisan Bulletin, Bombay, 24 (?) December, 1937.
20. Chandrashekhar Singh's letter to Jawaharlal Nehru, dated Patna, 5 January, 1938, AICC File, op.cit.
21. Sahajanand's letter to President, INC. Also Ramnandan Mishra's letter to Rajendra Prasad, dated Laheriasarai, 17 January, 1938, ibid.
22. Ramautar Ram's letter to Jawaharlal Nehru and reply thereto, AICC File No.G-32, 1938.
23. Cf. Note 21 above.
24. Amrit Bazar Patrika, op.cit.
25. Indian Annual Register, July-Dec., 1938.
26. AICC File No.42, 1936, Working Committee Proceedings, Minutes 1936-38, 29 December, 1936 to 25 February 1938.
27. Ibid.
28. S2, pp. 18-49.